faint, familiar sensation--half nausea, half excitement. It was the dark side of his surgeon's skill that he had faced long ago--the fascination of the helpless body, the mastery of wielding the knife, the power over life and death. We all have a wolf. That was his. But he chose to heal.

Think like a doctor, then. Even the mad have reasons. Why were they here?

Something connected with Jim's loss. That friendship had been too tight, too exclusive for some time. He had suspected a dozen times that there was more to it than friendship--and let it ride. Spock's strength and the inferno of that repressed fire could be terrifying--or terrifyingly attractive, to a confirmed risk taker--and only Spock's Vulcan half was locked to that seven year cycle. If he had been released from it, McCoy had no doubt who was responsible. Given the depth of their attraction and the determination of one starship captain, Spock wouldn't have had a chance. Sex. Death. Spock might be compelled to seek release at risk of his life.

But why here? Why bring McCoy?

The drums pulsed louder and the slaves of the house dimmed all the lights but that dragon's blood jewel over the stage. McCoy's eyes were not as quick as the Vulcanoid's to adjust to the gloom. Two indistinct figures on the stage simply materialized out of the dark. The drums died down. The bells chimed in whispers.

"Lords, Ladies, Conquerors All, welcome to the House of Barak and the hospitality of the house. Tarsa the Guardian welcomes you and begs to serve your pleasure."

"Your days of serving it are past, Eunuch. Show us the Golden Slave." It was the elder who spoke from the audience, stroking the cheek of one of his pets.

"Indulge me, lord. Not all our guests may know the pleasure in store for them--or be as eager as you to partake. I see new faces here, war weary victors newly returned from the reaches of space, surely deserving of the keenest joy that flesh can feel.

"Masters--when does the fire burn fiercest for quenching? Which of all the joys of the bond is best? And which--once in a lucky man's lifetime--may be enjoyed outside the bond?" The guardian's voice fell to a dramatic whisper as he repeated, "What does every conqueror dream of?"

McCoy felt a riptide of tension and surmise circle the room, felt Spock's stillness. He became aware that it was the second figure of the two on the stage that spoke, that both were hooded and cloaked in slave's black, and that a light was growing on the figure in front as it stood motionless, head bowed.

"I bring you a young male of the warrior class, physically perfect, certified sound and whole in every respect--and burning, burning in the flames of Taaz Avine."

"Taaz Avine," they gave it back to him, a sigh, a dream, the way men said "paradise" who believed in it, or "home" as they lay dying.

Wanting to believe, they challenged it.

"Whoremaster, you know what would become of one who promised such delights falsely?" There was menace in that and a hot second in the next voice.

"Or to one who imprisoned a warrior of the Empire to use his bondmate thus?"

"Lords, lords--" Tarsa soothed them. "Would a sane man even contemplate such risk? Arain has proved his condition in a hundred encounters and his mate cannot seek him here. The slave was taken in war and he is human."

Human, thought McCoy, trying to guess the height of that silent figure.

"A human in Taaz Avine?"

"Let him prove it, my lords. So sure am I that only his own lord's touch can sate him that he himself is prize for the one who brings him to climax."

"No more bickering," came a woman's decisive voice. "Put it to the test."

"I but awaited your command, Lady." The taller of the two figures reached forward and put his hands on the full hood of the other's cloak. "Youth," Tarsa whispered, and the hood slid back, showing a touseled golden crown. "Beauty," and the slave slowly lifted his head.

The watchers leaned forward, and McCoy with them, suspended between hope and despair. Beauty indeed. An unruly mane streaked tawny at the tips, which rested on the black clad shoulders. Wide brow, slumbering fire in the large eyes, stubborn line of jaw, strong column of the throat--James Kirk's features. But as Tarsa's hands stroked the shoulders, parted the edges of the cloak to show a V of white flesh below the hollow of the throat, McCoy shook his head in silent negation. That tranced submission could not belong to the Captain of the Enterprise.

The V at the neck elongated as the cloak was inexorably parted. The drums, the heat of the room had somehow gotten into McCoy's bloodstream. He could feel a pulse at the back of his knees, hear his own heartbeat. The perfect sculpture of the torso showed now, raised lines of the collarbones, hard planes and edges of the pectorals, strong cage of the ribs standing out over a hound lean waist --and the hands, centered below the naval, holding the gold chains that linked wrist to wrist.

"Arain," Tarsa whispered as the velvet slipped down the rounded bulk of shoulders and biceps. "The flames of Taaz Avine in chains of gold."

He pulled the cloak free, and for a frozen moment the slave stood still, then the clasped hands fell to his parted thighs, and the gold arc of the chain glinted in the air, underlining the heavy weight of his sex.

"Desire," said Tarsa, "that has never been sated." With two fingers, a mere whisper of a touch, he stroked the slave's neck and looked down at the heavy cock rising before the motionless body.

"First bidding."

The bids tumbled, one after the other, like waves beating against the still figure. Sweat stung McCoy's eyes; he dared not wipe it away, afraid that one movement would turn the frozen Vulcan at his side into a berserker.. But Spock did not move or speak.

As the high bidder stood up--the elder in his flock of pets--and the time candle was lit, McCoy fixed his eyes on the lantern above the stage. He had seen sex shows before. He had no desire to see this one. The force with which Spock jerked his head down almost broke his neck, and the glare of madness in his eyes sent McCoy's glance skittering to the bodies on the stage. Only Arain lived,